

Promoting the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Geography

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) movement has emerged in recent decades as a powerful force of change in higher education. It is based on the straight-forward premise that academics should apply the same standards of scholarship to their teaching as they do to their research. Although SoTL encompasses the ideal of "scholarly teaching" – the well-founded belief that effective teaching in any discipline requires a deep scholarly or scientific engagement with its subject matter – it goes further in at least three ways.

First, SoTL suggests that scholarly teaching involves engagement not only with a discipline's subject matter, but with other bodies of knowledge, research and practice. This engagement involves keeping up with literature on pedagogy in geography, for example, as well as developing a familiarity with relevant principles of learning theory and educational psychology, elements of curriculum and course design, and effective strategies for teaching and learning. When I've attended workshops on these topics, I so often hear participants exclaim: "So that's why it works..." "Now I see the reason..." "If only I'd known sooner..." that I see this engagement with broader educational theory and practice as essential to "scholarly teaching."

Second, SoTL asks scholars to use this knowledge to improve their teaching through self-reflection, study, and research. These involve questioning our current practices and assumptions about what we do in the classroom – "Is this really an effective way of introducing this concept? How might I use this example to cultivate critical thinking among students?" – and also researching our own teaching to improve it. I remember Cary Komoto once asking participants in a Geography Faculty Development Alliance workshop, "What questions do you have about your own teaching and your own teaching strategies?" After a moment's pause to reflect on "Why haven't I thought of doing that myself?" participants suggested dozens of topics they had never considered questioning or researching: "I wonder if there is a better way to explain this..." "Will this activity improve student understand-

ing..." "Does this textbook work?" In this way, SoTL suggests the need for continued and continual questioning of the assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas we carry into the classroom.

Third, SoTL encourages the public sharing of ideas about teaching and learning in the same way we encourage the sharing of our scholarly work – through discussion, presentation at conferences, and publication in major journals like the *Annals* and *PG* as well as in other specialized publications like the *Journal of Geography* and *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*. Part

of the change involves making our teaching a more social activity – one we willingly discuss and share with our colleagues. But it also means opening up our classrooms to discussion and study by our colleagues and peers, a difficult step for many faculty. Whereas discussion and review of research manuscripts are seen as positive ways to improve rigor and sharpen arguments, discussion and review of our teaching (and teaching materials) continues to be seen by many in a negative light, almost as an encroachment on academic freedom by sinister administrators. The SoTL movement is attempting to change such attitudes by encouraging faculty to share ideas and research in new and different ways.

But don't we already do this, at least to some degree? Yes, but as Randy Bass has written in his much cited article "The scholarship of teaching: What's the problem?" (*Inventio*, Feb. 1999):

One telling measure of how differently teaching is regarded from traditional...research...is what a difference it makes to have a "problem" in one versus the other. In scholarship and research, having a "problem" is at the heart of the investigative process... But in one's teaching, a "problem" is something you don't want to have, and if you have one, you probably want to fix it. Asking a colleague about a

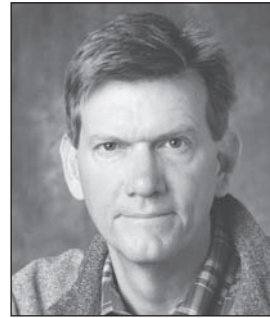
problem in his or her research is an invitation; asking about a problem in one's teaching would probably seem like an accusation. Changing the status of the problem in teaching from terminal

remediation to ongoing investigation is precisely what the movement for a scholarship of teaching is all about.

Making this change does matter to geography. It matters greatly to early career faculty who often find that some of their most stressful experiences revolve around issues of teaching and learning.

Research seems to indicate that when these new faculty are offered help such as the kind SoTL can provide, not only do they develop into better teachers, their productivity carries into all areas of their professional lives. SoTL also matters to students by encouraging faculty to innovate, experiment, and improve their teaching and to base their decisions about course and curriculum design on sound research and theory.

But I think SoTL matters to geography as a discipline. In coming years, higher education is likely to face many new challenges and opportunities. Some of these have to do with far-reaching changes underway such as the impacts of globalization, the changing dynamics of the knowledge economy, and changing public support for higher education, but many have to do directly with issues of teaching and learning. These include the rapid evolution and deployment of distance education and learning technologies; increased pressure for accountability; and the need to encourage, educate and support greater diversity among students than ever before. The scholarship of teaching and learning provides the perspective needed to respond creatively and effectively to such changes and the background our discipline's leaders will need as they respond to these challenges. ■



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